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The ABCs of Food Storage

Acetic acid, formaldehyde, tars, alcohol, and creosote hardly sound like the stuff to be dining on. Yet, these substances have long been found on tables throughout the world, and they find their way into our bellies. Acetic acid is such a strong chemical that *The Condensed Chemical Dictionary* warns: "Caution! Causes severe burns"; and formaldehyde, well known as a constituent of embalming fluid, rates a "Warning! Causes irritation of the skin, eyes, nose and throat."

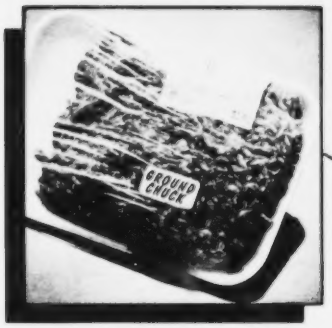
Sounds like enough to make Miss Manners burp out loud, doesn't it?

Yet, these items have been used for centuries to preserve food. In small quantities, of course. Acetic acid is found in vinegar—often used as a preservative. Formaldehyde, tars, and creosote are all byproducts of burning wood, a method of preserving meats. Even sugar has been used as a preservative (it was first added to jam for that purpose), and salt's use for pickling cabbage (to give us sauerkraut) probably dates back to the days of Genghis Kahn.

Drying is another traditional method of preserving foods. Meats, fruits and beans were among the items that simply could be left out in the sun—under proper conditions—to remove the moisture.

But before the days of the tin can and the refrigerator, there was no guarantee that foods would remain unspoiled. Consequently, they were often heavily dosed with spices and other flavorings, and entire cuisines were developed around the world based on hot, spicy tastes that could hide the putridity.

Ah, but these *are* the days of the tin can and the refrigerator, not to mention home freezers, plastic wrap, aseptic packaging, and a host of preservatives that have been generally recognized as safe. So, preserving food is not the problem it once was.

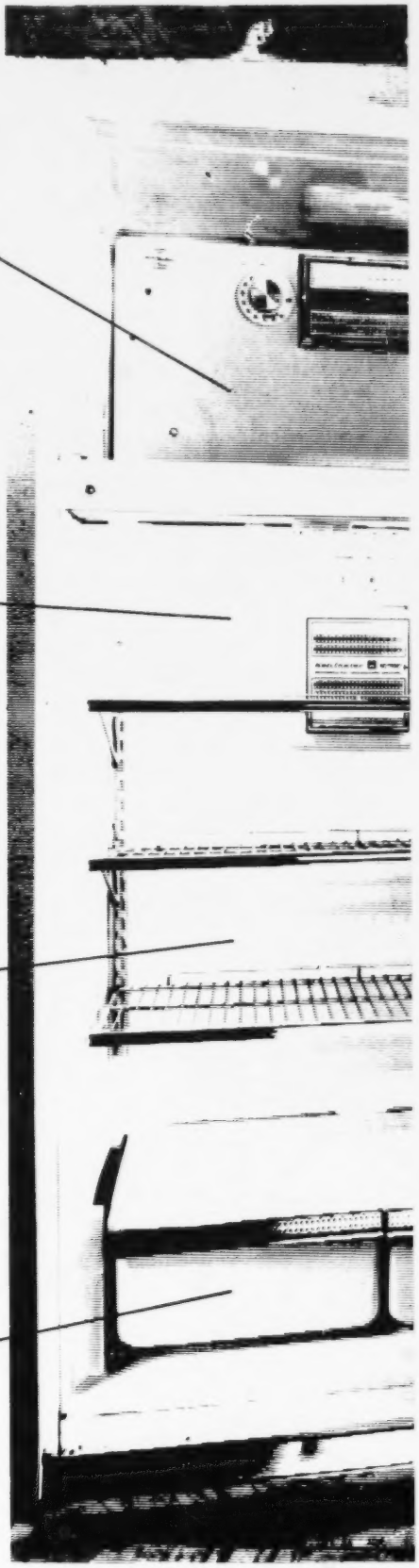


2 to 3 months

5 days

2 weeks

1 to 7 days



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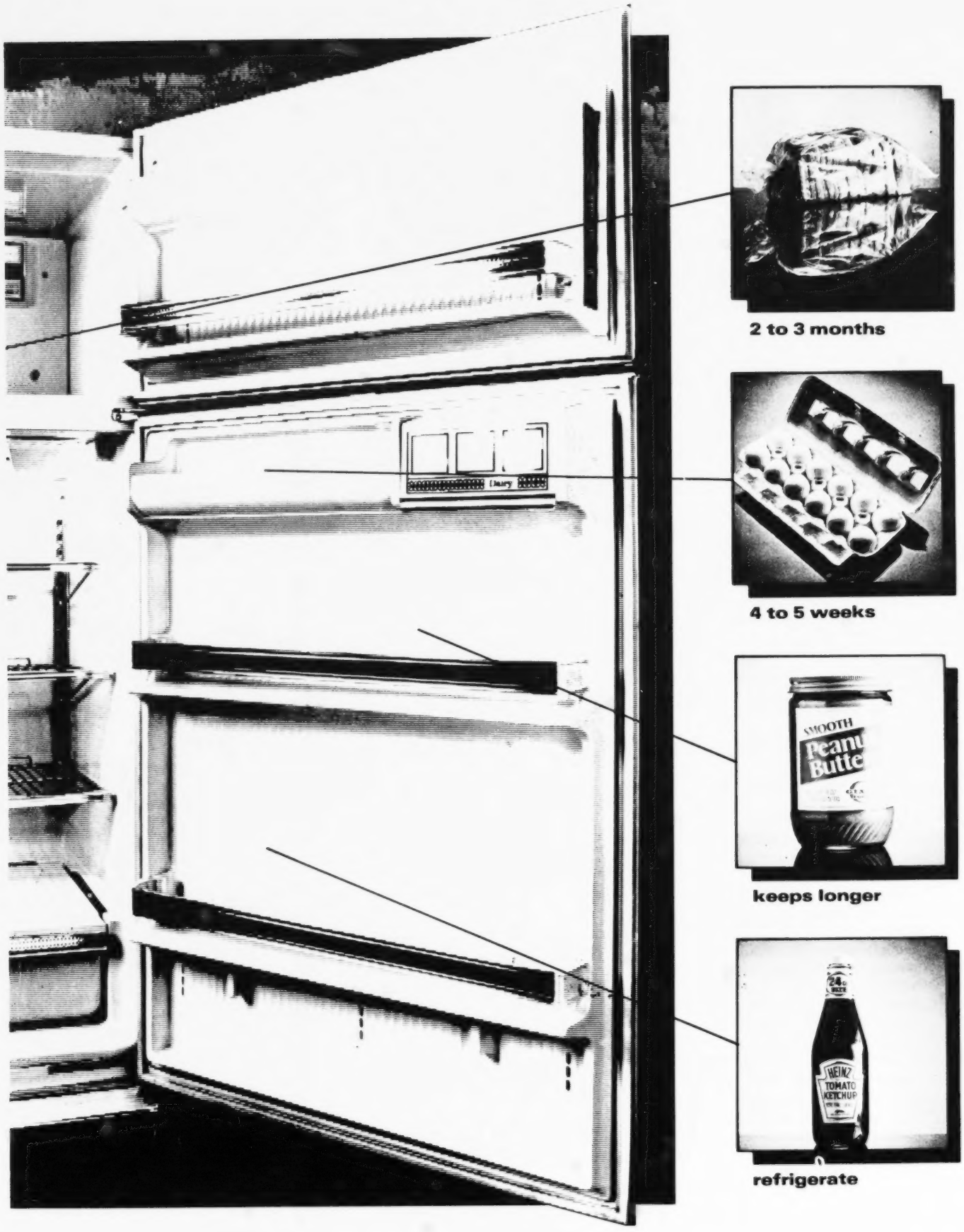
SMOOTH
Peanut Butter
HEINZ
TOMATO KETCHUP
2 to 3 months
4 to 5 weeks
keeps longer
refrigerate

Freezing only retards the growth of bacteria—it does not kill them.

Indeed, the problem today is that, knowing the means of preservation are so good, we may tend to keep things too long.

Even most canned goods—which some might think could last virtually forever—should not be stocked for more than a year. Dried foods such as pasta have a recommended shelf life of two years. Molds do grow under refrigeration (see "Danger Lurks Among the Molds" in the December 1980-January 1981 *FDA Consumer*); and freezing only retards the growth of bacteria—it does not kill them.

Outdated products aren't always dangerous. But often, the kept-too-long food will have an off taste or lose its flavor and nutrients.

There are few hard and fast rules about storing food. Generally, items should be kept in airtight containers. Cured meats such as bacon, luncheon meats, sausage and ham are not recommended for the freezer. While most milk products other than ice cream can't be frozen, fresh milk can be kept in the freezer for a month, and butter for up to two months.

Following is a rundown of storage guidelines for some of the more popular foods; these guidelines aren't the final word—common sense is often the best guideline:

Beef—Fresh: variety (heart, liver, etc.), 1 day in the refrigerator; ground, 1 to 2 days; chops, steaks, sausage, 2 to 3 days; roasts, 2 to 4 days. Frozen: variety and sausage, 1 to 2 months; ground, 2 to 3 months; chops, 6 to 9 months; roasts, 6 to 12 months.

Bread—Commercial bread can be frozen for 2 to 3 months; home-baked yeast bread, a month.

Butter—Keeps in the refrigerator for 1 to 2 weeks.

Ketchup—Unopened, 12 months in the pantry; refrigerate after opening.

Cheese—Cottage cheese will keep 10 to 30 days in the refrigerator; opened cream cheese, 2 weeks; opened Swiss, brick, processed, etc., 3 to 4 weeks.

Chicken—Two to 3 days in the refrigerator, 12 months in the freezer. Chicken livers will keep 1 to 2 days in the refrigerator, 3 months frozen.

Eggs—In the shell and fresh, they'll keep 4 to 5 weeks in the refrigerator; hard-boiled, a week. Don't freeze them.

Ice cream—Not more than 2 to 4 months in the freezer.

Lettuce—Unwashed head lettuce will keep 5 to 7 days in the refrigerator crisper; washed and thoroughly drained, 3 to 5 days.

Lunch meats—Four to 6 days under refrigeration.

Mayonnaise—Two to 3 months unopened in the pantry; refrigerate after opening.

Milk—Count on 5 days in the refrigerator.

Pork—Fresh: 2 to 3 days for chops, 1 to 2 for ground, 2 to 4 for roasts. Frozen: 1 to 2 months for ground, 2 to 3 for chops, 3 to 6 for roasts.

Potatoes—Store in a cool, dry place but not in the refrigerator.

Rice, white—Up to 2 years if kept tightly closed and in a cool, dry place.

Sugar—Granulated sugar will keep indefinitely in a tightly closed container.

Vegetables—Store-bought frozen vegetables can be kept up to 8 months in the freezer; fresh vegetables, from 1 to 7 days in the refrigerator.

Here are some special handling instructions for certain other foods:

- ***Apples*** and ***cherries*** should not be washed before being stored; they should be kept in a crisper or moisture-resistant wrap.
- ***Spices*** and ***herbs*** are best kept frozen or refrigerated.
- ***Cornmeal*** should be refrigerated, especially in the summer.
- ***Peanut butter*** keeps longer if refrigerated.
- ***Gravy*** can be frozen for up to a month.
- Refrigerated ***chocolate syrup*** may keep up to 6 months after opening.
- Don't store ***rolls*** in the refrigerator door because the temperature fluctuations and jarring mars the quality.
- ***Coffee*** should be refrigerated after opening; it'll keep for up to two weeks.
- Don't keep ***oysters*** more than a day in the refrigerator.

For more information on meat and poultry storage, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) has a hotline. Call toll free (800) 535-4555 between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Eastern Time. FSIS also publishes *The Safe Food Book*. For copies, write to:

FSIS—Publications
Room 1163-S
U.S. Dept. of Agriculture
Washington, D.C. 20250

For more detailed information on food storage, plus a chart that can be hung on the kitchen wall, the Food Marketing Institute, a trade organization of supermarkets, offers a publication, *The Food Keeper*. Write to:

Publication Sales
Food Marketing Institute
1750 K St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20006

Include a stamped, self-addressed, legal-size envelope. The first five copies are free; 6 to 99 copies are 10 cents each; 100 or more are $8 per hundred; and 1,000 or more are $70 per thousand.

And, remember, good storage habits mean you'll get the most nutrition and the best taste from your foods. ■

—Roger W. Miller

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